

# 'Changing Marriage? Messing with Mr. In-Between?: Reflections Upon Media Debates on Same-Sex Marriage in Ireland'

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## Abstract

This article explores some aspects of the emergence of local debates around same-sex marriage in the Republic of Ireland. Taking up this issue through an analysis of Irish (local) mediatized reactions to the introduction of German gay marriage in 2001, I point to how we can see some evidence of a shift away from Irish traditional relationships between the social, politics and religion, which served to police and silence much public discussion about sexuality. While prudery about sexual issues still remains, my paper points to the emergence of prudent-yet-tolerant sharing of stories about the social exclusion of same-sex couples. In spite of recent setbacks for a legal case seeking the recognition of a foreign same-sex marriage in Ireland, we may point to a growing political and legal consciousness for the extension of rights for lesbian and gay couples but it is still unclear as to what model will be adopted in the Irish context. While in the Irish case, there is only intermittent media interest in 'gay marriage', we can locate this struggle within the framework of the sociology of intimate citizenship. Not only do claims for same-sex marriage illustrate pointed inequalities experienced by lesbians and gay men, the stories also problematize the naturalness of heterosexuality. The Irish case may, of course, be explored within the context of a global challenge to gender identity where the imagined same-sex couple enjoy some element of certainty in an uncertain world.

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**Keywords:** *Same-Sex Partnership, Marriage, Media, Irish Times, GLBT, Ireland*

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## Introduction: two poofs and a cake?

1.12 August 2001. As soon as I picked up the Irish Times newspaper that day, I sensed that the photograph of two gay men at their wedding in Hanover was a significant moment in the development of LGBT rights. The introduction of same-sex unions in Germany proved to be a critical moment both for those seeking the establishment of 'gay marriage' and for those who felt it was objectionable. The introduction of gay marriage in Germany, as a case in point, had echoes as far away as South Korea (Digital Chosunilbo, 2005) and its significance was recently recalled in the online German press (Deutsche Welle, 2006).



**Picture 1.** Newly-wed German gay couple, 2 August 2001

1.2 The significance of same-sex marriage debates cannot be under-estimated. It has led one eminent British sociologist to note how 'gay marriage' has gone from being a minority issue to a key political battleground, where "the campaign for the legal recognition of same-sex partnerships in some form had

become the dominant claim in the non-heterosexual communities ... as well as obvious concern to the faith communities whose injunctions helped taboo same-sex activities in the first place" (Weeks, 2004: 158).

**1.3** From being intrigued by the photograph initially, and perhaps realising the importance of the visual, I began to notice how I was not alone in thinking the image mattered. A chain of letters to the editor of Ireland's leading daily newspaper started to appear, so I decided to 'track' this issue. On 14 August 2001, a letter appeared, from a contributor, named Vera, who was highly critical of the wedding photograph and its implications:

Sir, - A photograph in your edition of August 2nd shows a German gay couple cutting the cake at their travesty of a wedding in Berlin. I just wonder if there will be any outcry from your reading public as to the picture being disturbing, shocking, and/or tasteless and insensitive. I do know that if my grandmother were alive, she would give vent to a deeply felt and fervent "muise go sábháilidh dia sinn, agus Amén", a Thiarna!" - Yours, etc., Vera. (Irish Times, Letters to the editor, 14 August 2001)

**1.4** Initially, Vera's letter reminded me of the curious letter by the woman with no nose, cited in Goffman's work on stigma (Goffman, 1963). I noted how Vera's standpoint was more complex because she was both critical of how gay marriage messed with the certainty of Irish modernity, with the fixity of gender roles and with religious tradition. However, she was also adopting an *invitational* approach to other correspondents, which opened up this debate.

**1.5** Unlike subsequent media images of same-sex couples in the media, (pictures 2, 3 and 4, below as illustration), the reaction to the 2001 photograph generated discussion. Over a period of about a month – until the tragic events of 11 September 2001 in the USA overtook the discussion - a lively mediatized debate around gay marriage / civil partnership developed in response to Vera's letter. Many contributors used the photograph as a sensitising concept (Van den Hoonaard, 1997) that would shape their response to the issue. The motive to write also would sometimes lead them into personal disclosure about sexual orientation or their own dilemmas about same-sex relationships. Focusing on the chain of letters and related media articles from an idiographic approach perspective (Schwartz & Jacobs, 1979: 69; Riesman, 1994), I gathered data on the Irish case, which is still ongoing.

**1.6** In the next section, I shall outline the specificities of the Irish case and elaborate my research methodology. Then I present the data as a chronology of stories, and set out my analysis of same, before summarising my conclusions to date.

## **The Irish Context: an ongoing social transformation**

**2.1** Positing that tensions about same-sex marriage is one strand of a broader "cultural revolution" wherein the normative understandings of marriage and the family are being problematised, we can see that a new salience is given to the (same-sex) couple as part of a wider, often messy process of *individualization* in late or liquid modernity (Weeks, 2004).

**2.2** With reference to the Irish case (Republic of Ireland), the issue of same-sex marriage occurs within the context of significant contemporary social transformation. What makes Ireland a particularly interesting case is how many elements of the transformation of intimacy are occurring within a relatively short time-span. In many respects, fixed gender roles, the good provider and so forth, are *within* living memory for many of my thirty-something and forty-something contemporaries.

**2.3** Ireland has had a long, drawn out period of a Catholic modernity, which can be broadly situated from the foundation of the Irish State (1921) through to the late 1960's (the lead-in to Ireland's accession to the European Union in 1973). The roots of this period can be traced back to the post-famine era (Inglis, 1998a), where population growth was controlled through both limiting the rate of marriage within families and through the enforcement of sexual abstinence outside of wedlock. During the formative years of the newly independent Irish State, legislation and family policies were introduced to privilege marriage and prohibit divorce. Women were normatively supposed to become wives and mothers under what one writer termed a 'hetero-patriarchal logic' (Luibhéid, 2006). The gendered regulation of women's lives, which still shapes women's oppression today, was developed through a nexus between Constitutional and legislative means.

**2.4** Through the social control over women and the protection of marriage, heterosexuality was endowed with both a dominant position and a sense of naturalness. Under the 1937 Irish Constitution, the State was charged with taking care to "guard with special care the institution of marriage, on which the family is founded, and to protect it against attack". A number of articles in the Constitution served the end of 'protecting' the family. A 1924 law made divorce illegal, but it was later banned under the 1937 Constitution. Other measures sought to protect women from any work that might be detrimental to their roles are the primary carers or be unsuited to their sex.

**2.5** A critical role in the surveillance of women in Irish society was played by the Catholic Church, which was accorded a 'special position... as the guardian of the Faith' under the Constitution, until 1972. Where the State went too far in seeking to liberalise social policy, the Catholic Church could, and did, intervene in politics. Catholic teaching explicitly shaped Irish social policy, particularly in relation to education, and one leading legal theorist argues that there is still a palpable 'Catholic legacy' in some legislation today (Kelly, 1994: 1094-1099). Thus the logic of both Catholic Church and State created important barriers women's equality in both the public and private spheres (Mahon, 1994; O'Connor, 2000), in the name of seeking to solidify (Bauman, 2000) gender roles through securing hegemonic masculinity and men's privilege, and placing women under control (Inglis, 2005).

**2.6** While several feminist accounts demonstrate how women have been – and in many ways still are – subject to overt regulation in the Irish State and the Catholic Church (Luibhéid, 2006), somewhat less attention is how non-heterosexual men or women were also rendered as Other by Church and State (Walshe, 1997). While gender norms established unequal sexual/intimate citizenship for men and women, lesbians and gay men excluded from being sexual or intimate citizens. Weeks (1998) remarks that not everyone goes about wanting to be a 'sexual citizen', but Alexander (1997) leads us to note how only some 'bodies' qualify as citizens. Lesbians and gay men were to be silent, celibate or compliant or they could face pressure that would expel them from the State.

**2.7** While women were subject to an overt gender regime of regulation, lesbians and gay men were subject to particular legal and moral sanction, which was enhanced by an obdurate silence about homosexuality in social circles. In gendered ways, homosexuality was policed. While some relatively well-connected homosexuals, such as the actor, Micheal MacLiammoir and his long-time companion, Hilton Edwards, could live in relative comfort as long as they were discreet about their sexuality, others were less fortunate. Their contemporary, the lesbian writer Kate O'Brien, had her novels banned in Ireland because of single allusion to homosexuality (Walshe, 1997).

**2.8** If intellectuals were silenced, ordinary lesbians and gay men were policed at every turn. 'Ordinary' lesbians were able to live as invisible sexual subjects in the Irish body politic until the 1970's. They were subject to the double stigma of being single women. Some lesbians found support through the company of other women via the emergent feminist movement from the mid-1970's.

**2.9** Ordinary gay men could find themselves facing the full rigours of the law if they caught by the police committing acts of gross indecency (cottaging). Homosexual acts were considered profoundly unmanly. Often disowned by their families, any gay men who were arrested were sometimes given the option of quietly leaving the State (in lieu of a jail term). Those who ended up in jail often left Ireland upon their release because of the shame. Only rarely in modernity could a man who had been imprisoned for gross indecency, win an appeal. One example of this is the case of Robinson McClure (I.R. 275, 1945) who successfully argued that he was a good family man that had strayed in a moment of madness.

**2.10** Thus under modernity, the State and the Catholic Church sought to preserve hegemonic masculinity's position by subordinating women, but rendering non-heterosexual women invisible and by using the legal system to imprison or to exclude gay men from the jurisdiction. This approach was possible while the moral monopoly (Inglis, 1998a) of the Catholic Church held sway. However, with the emergence of social movements, including the Gay Rights Movement and the Feminist Movement, the Irish State was no longer able to contain the homosexual problem by intimidating, imprisoning and excluding with impunity. As lesbian and gay identities became possible in Ireland as a lifestyle, a new politics emerged (see Rose, 1994) which began to seek gay law reform and equality for lesbians, gay men and bisexuals. I will refrain from elaborating further on the LGBT movement (see Rose, 1994; Hug, 1997) within this article, but it suffices to state that we can appreciate how Catholicism, in particular, has shaped the worldview of our protagonist, Vera, around the idea of gay marriage. Nonetheless, in late modernity, she frames her indignation with some degree of uncertainty when she wondered if anyone felt the same.

**2.11** I posit that Vera's initial tentativeness may reflect our current-day experience of late or liquid modernity, where inescapable "risks which previous generations have not had to face" (Giddens, 1991: 4). It is fair to suppose that she would know that the norm of marriage had moved from the modernist idyll. However, she seems to downplay many of the complexities of late or liquid modernity around the family, sexuality and intimacy (Giddens, 1991, 1992) and seems not to acknowledge how any "redistribution and reallocation of modernity's melting powers" (Bauman, 2000:6) is occurring in uneven, complex ways.

**2.12** Heterosexual marriage in Ireland today is as popular as ever but there are underlying shifts. While the overall rate of marriage increased from 4.6 per thousand in 1996 to 5.2 per thousand in 2002, the proportion of marriages in Ireland which are 'civil marriages' (rather than Church weddings) has increased significantly from 5.7% of all marriages in 1996 to 17.6% in 2002. This increase in the civil marriage rate could be associated with the rising financial costs of traditional weddings and with the rise of re-marriage, as Irish divorce was introduced in recent years (CSO, 2005). While Vera seeks to portray heterosexual marriage as

'natural', we can argue that heterosexual marriage is being increasingly fashioned by active agents who plan for their 'big day' and live together happily ever after (or not). Thus, while it seems rather simplistic to do so, Vera seeks to portray heterosexual marriage as the norm. Perhaps sensing this blind spot in her position, those who support the recognition of non-traditional, non-heterosexual family forms are able to speak out.

**2.13** One way of thinking about how this ephemeral debate takes place is to seek how there is an interplay between a normative ideal and the reality of people's lives. Jeff Weeks (1995: 99) distinguishes between *myth* and *fiction* where:

"the dominant (hetero)sexual identities in our culture have some of the qualities of *myths*: they speak for an assumed naturalness, eternity and truth which belie their historical and contingent nature. The radical, oppositional identities which have arisen in and against the hegemonic ones can be seen as *fictions*: they offer narratives of individual life, collective memory and imagined alternatives which provide the motivation and inspiration for change. In that sense, they are not only fictions – they are *necessary fictions*. Without them we would have no basis to explain our individual needs and desires, nor a sense of collective belonging that provides the agency and means for change." (Weeks, 1995: 99, *my italics*).

**2.14** Weeks (1995) points to a central fault-line in the debate about homosexuality/ heterosexuality more generally, but his point is relevant here. While many Irish contemporary struggles for lesbian and gay equality like to suggest that what is being sought is 'nothing special for ourselves' as a political strategy (Byrne, 2002), I would argue that the myth/ fiction dynamic is in evidence in this aspect of the Irish debates about same-sex partnership/ marriage.

### **Research methodology: seeing letters as data in context**

**3.1** While I had a rather small dataset, the media contributions are a complete set of the interactions to this debate, meeting Mishler's *validation* criterion (Mishler, 1990). The analysis of the data was framed after Michel Peillon's (1982; 1984) work on the centrality of ideology to the Irish media. Following Peillon (1982), the cycle of Letters to the Editor in the *Irish Times* newspaper (14 August 2001 – 7 September 2001) constitutes a frame for theorising Irish (local) specificities of wider (global) debates about same-sex intimacy (generally) and the extension of rights to non-heterosexual couples (specifically). Peillon's (1982; 1984) work on the ideological underpinnings of media discourse argues that *the ideological* is "a system of ideas, beliefs, and preferences [which defines] the atmosphere and cultural climate of a society" (1982: 134).

**3.2** Peillon used *ideology* as a term in lieu of the word *culture*, which he argued had been "used in anthropological works to refer not only to the beliefs but also to the behaviour of groups or societies". He added that of "various forms of ideological expression... the more complete, the most revealing" can be found in newspaper discourse because "the writer is unhampered by strategic considerations [and can] express ideology in a more spontaneous form, since it is not transformed by being censored or polished for political or polemical ends" (Peillon, 1982: 134). Peillon suggested, "ideological unity is ... realised not by a consensus of views but by the mobilisation of a few underlying principles ... as an intellectual and moral framework within which cultural orientations develop" (Peillon, 1984: 56).

**3.3** Peillon (1982) thought that editorial control of the media was not important in relation to ideology, and other research tends to support this view. Peillon accepted that the participants' Letters to the Editor were more likely to be middle/upper class and, while the selection of letters is subject to editorial control, he argued that any ideological content intended by contributors is not "distorted" by censorship. Rather it appears editors select letters that perpetuate lively interest in debate rather than anything else (c.f. Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001, 2002; Raeymaeckers, 2005). In my own case, I have no way of knowing the editor's reasoning but it seems plausible that newsworthiness (i.e. cultural salience) may be implicated.

**3.4** As a process, data analysis consisted of three inter-connected aspects. Firstly, I considered the photograph's place in the debate. As an image, it did not seem to be "disturbing, shocking, and/or tasteless and insensitive", as Vera suggested, but I did feel that portrayed a meaningful and recognisable ritual (Chalfen, 1998). Secondly, I collected the stories that were shared through these contributions to the newspaper, and were in reaction to the image or to Vera's initial critique of the photograph's implications. Below, I set out the debate in a chronological fashion.

**3.5** Thirdly, by analysing the discourse, as a drama, I sought to theorise about immediate case and the broader social context of the debate. Anthropologist, Victor Turner (1980) called for us to attend to both specific *stories* and wider social *dramas* (Turner, 1980). Turner's concepts, perhaps unwittingly, have become central to the analysis of late-modern intimacies, which are concerned with how *necessary fictions* are elaborated (Weeks, 1995) or how people are involved in *doing intimacy* (Plummer (2003:12). In the Irish context, however, there seems to be a distinct reticence to talk about 'sex'.

**3.6** When I took up Plummer's (1995: 22) call to see how stories are 'grounded in historically evolving communities of memory, structured through age, class, race, gender and sexual preference', I began to notice how participants in the Irish Times discussion about same-sex marriage felt the need to respect Irish public prudery about sexuality. Indeed, prudery has become a master category about the how potentially stigmatising public discussions about sexuality are managed.

**3.7** Prudery about sexuality (Inglis, 2005) can be seen as having its roots in modernity's control over women and their bodies (McLaughlin, 1994; Inglis, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c) and wider social pressures to avoid politics (Eliasoph, 1997), I argue that prudery also applies to how homosexuality can be discussed in public. We might distinguish between face-to-face interactions and mediatized interactions.

**3.8** In face-to-face settings, there seems to be a high level of prudery about Irish sexual politics. I found this to be the case in observing how intimacy is discussed in public activist meetings. I witnessed ongoing deliberation around disclosure. Goffman (1963: 57) captures this dilemma as being about "to display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to lie or not to lie; and in each case to whom, how, when and where." Humour often allows people to opt out of saying what they want to, so at a public forum on gay rights I attended, one gay man blurted out how 'we must talk about sex!' When people in the room started to laugh at this, the participant ceased talking and broke into laughter. Likewise, I saw how some intellectuals who favoured talking about policy rather than letting participants in a public forum talk about their experiences and needs could instill prudery. It seemed to me that certain activists, who perhaps should have been facilitating talk about intimacy and feelings, were instead in thrall to 'policy' and were operating as the new "legislators of morality and meaning" (Tovey, 2001: 79) rather than coaxing people to speak out. So even while new sexual identities are emerging in Ireland - married gay men, lesbian mums, disabled queers, deaf gays, gay academics, - there seemed to be a politicized reserve around talk about intimacy despite the relative safety of the spaces involved (activist forums) and this shaped people's presentations of self (Goffman, 1959). This I put down to prudery in public spaces.

**3.9** In a more mediatized interaction, as the Irish Times debate, there was more freedom. It seemed that the more anonymous (if virtual) space of the newspaper letters page offered more freedom for doing intimacy (Plummer, 2003: 12-13). It suggested to me that while prudery appears to be a barrier to 'real life' discourse about intimacy, the contributors to the letters page have somewhat more freedom to speak out. I am reminded how Scheper-Hughes (1983) surmised over twenty years ago that mediatized storytelling could become a way of negotiating cultural changes in Ireland. Reflecting upon how harsh critics had attacked her earlier ethnographic work (Scheper-Hughes, 1977 [2001]) through the media, rather than to her face, she made a prophetic comment. She noted that "challenges coming from 'the natives' themselves, whether these be in the form of tribal petitions or irate 'Letters to the Editor' of the Irish Times" (Scheper-Hughes, 1983: 158) should be regarded as a part of an interactive ethnography work. She argued that this was how dissent often finds a home in Irish culture, where it was not prudent to make a face-to-face challenge. While Scheper-Hughes may have been writing somewhat tongue in cheek about her critics, her point seems to hold water!

**3.10** Another question is who is doing the dissenting. I found the media discourse to be an interesting lens by which we could theorise about a *liminal generation* in Ireland, who have lived through the social transformation of modernity to late modernity. While liminality was used to describe a discrete phase of a rite of passage, the term has been taken up elsewhere to refer to a *process* of experiencing and coping with enduring change (Little et al., 1998). For Little et al. (1998: 1491) "non-liminal existence is a creation and ideal of modernity, and post-modernity's deconstructions seem to have left the non-liminal ideal untouched" and so our late modern questioning of the self and identity may be 'normal'. The Irish generation of contributors to the newspaper actually remember modernity's 'prudery' as *social praxis* but are living through a period of social transformation. Their contributions, through the letters, plays an important part in developing a new, emergent language about intimacy. Simultaneously, late modernity becoming more 'liquid' (Bauman, 2000), and negotiation skills and languaging of the self become *the way* in which we cope with cultural (ideological challenges) and seek a home of sorts in an uncertain world as ascribed gender roles dissipate. Thus, fragmentary as this data is, it is an instance of a dialogic struggle over intimacy – *between myth and fiction* - made by a "tiny public" (Fine & Harrington, 2004) or a "public sphericule" (Cunningham, 2001) but its impact goes beyond its size in the transformation of gender.

## Exploring the Data

### a. The salience of the image

**4.1** It is relatively easy to understand how the photograph of the gay men provoked many reactions and how we imagine various aspects of doing intimacy (Plummer, 2003: 12-13) because of a visual trigger. It is not novel to point out how a good photograph can solicit rich, embodied reactions and emotions. The image challenges the familiar (heterosexual) wedding scene and formula of showing the cutting of a wedding cake

and challenges normative understandings of marriage as *queered* (Honeychurch, 1996; Ryan, 1997, 2000) because two men (or, alternatively, no women) are involved. As I reflected upon it, the image led to a feeling of schizophrenia and a realisation that I did not think much about romantic ideals of marriage.

**4.2** On one hand, the image represents disruption of the more widely understood concept of a 'married gay man' in modernity. From Oscar Wilde onwards, his image was a sharp warning to other men of the dangers of homosexuality. Wilde's present-day successors, such as the American phenomenon of (straight) men go on the 'down low' (i.e. having sex with men) (King, 2004), or the emergence of an Irish Married Gay Men's (MGM) support group, signals the emergence of a new identity politics. While modernity's MGM gender identities tended to be men who held significant links to heterosexual life, the photograph of two German men (Picture 1, above) seems to present a break with modernity and with heterosexuality. Rather than 'playing away' with other men, the couple break out by marrying a partner of the same sex. The image points to a caesura from the more nebulous modernist MGM identity because they are demanding formal recognition as married gay men in the late modern era.

**4.3** On the other hand, I thought that the image also bore striking resemblances to the few heterosexual weddings that I had witnessed. Part of me wondered if same-sex weddings should be 'the same' (Tyrauer, 2004) or if I wanted cake. However, the embodied image of the gay men cutting their wedding cake demonstrates the power of sameness. By taking up the same ritualised behaviour as heterosexual couples in a wedding day public space, they are seeking create 'necessary fictions' to support political claims for same-sex couples (Weeks, 1995; Valentine, 2002). Hence, the image is a rich symbol, providing us with 'food for thought' about weddings, ceremonies, consumerism, cakes and morality.

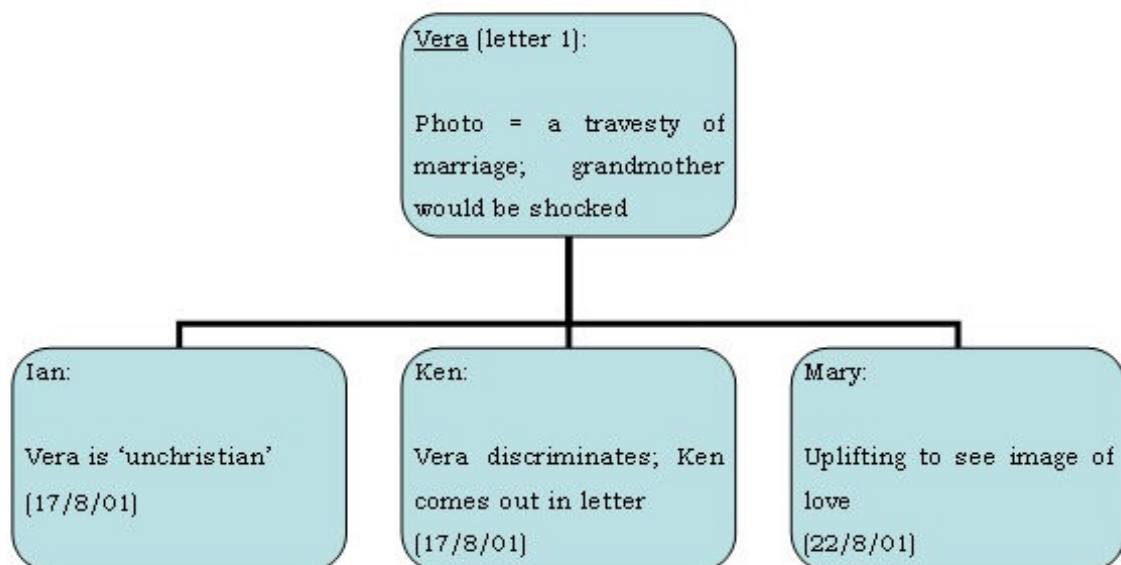
**4.4** Turning to the reaction of the protagonist in the mediatized reactions, we can suggest that Vera took up the visual image over the written word about 'gay marriage'. She professed her 'shock' at the photograph of the two gay men on the front page, but she ignored an article, several pages into the newspaper edition that day, in which a journalist's account of a German lesbian couple's wedding and supportive comments of family members was extensively documented (Scally, 2001). For Vera's part, the photograph, which we could place somewhere on a continuum of meaning (Chalfen, 1998), does not evoke visual pleasure (Mulvey, 1975) but disgust at the inauthenticity of gay lifestyles, which, of itself is a powerful cultural symbol (Kuhn, 1985). It is her reading of gay marriage's inauthenticity that leads her to term gay marriage as a travesty.

**4.5** Let us now consider the letters that followed Vera's initial letter.

## **b. Overview of the 2001 *Irish Times* gay marriage debate**

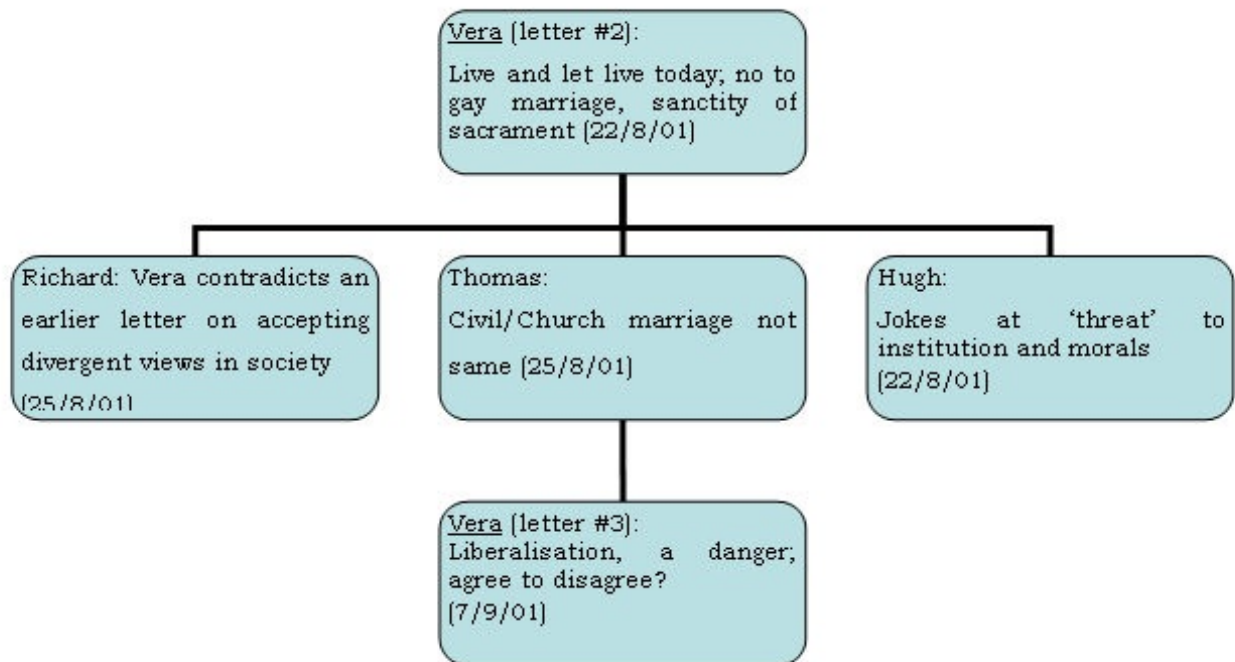
**4.6** We can visually summarise the structure of the interactions as two phases. I plot the timeline and select the 'kernel story' (Kalcik, 1975) of each letter to simplify the presentation:

### **Phase 1: Initial Letter and Responses**



### **Phase 2: Vera's Second Letter and Responses and Closure**





### c. The letters as stories

**4.7** In more detail, the mediatized interaction proceeds as follows. After the appearance of the photograph of two German gay men (picture 1, above, 2 August 2001), the opening contribution in reaction to it (14/8/01). **Vera** terms the picture of the same-sex wedding as being a *'travesty of a wedding'* and she wonders *'if there will be any outcry from your reading public as to the picture being disturbing, shocking, and/or tasteless and insensitive'*. **Vera's** letter ends with an Irish language phrase, which expresses the idea of 'God preserve us from harm'. **Vera** ventures to argue that her grandmother might have uttered this saying as a reaction to being scandalised by gay weddings.

**4.8** Following **Vera's** initial letter, two replies appear on 17 August 2001. **Ian** (17 August) briefly critiques Vera's ethical position as a Christian and argues that *'perhaps the only cause for outcry is that in 2001 Ireland still has these wonderful 'Christian' attitudes to any progress in understanding commitment between same-sex couples'*. **Ken** (17 August) argues that the real travesty is the non-existence rights for same-sex couples under the law and he argues that heterosexuals would not accept such inequality. Additionally, he is saddened by the idea that Catholics, who in traditional Ireland might not have understood homosexual love, would be so intolerant today. Taking the hypothetical grandmother further, he surmises: *'whatever about her Grandmother's fervent sayings, I am 100 per cent certain that, were any of my grandparents alive at the moment, all of them would be present when I marry my partner (of nearly 10 years) next year.'*

**4.9 Mary** (22 August 2001) writes, how she was delighted by the photograph because: *'when so much of your paper contains reports on war, crime, injustice, pollution, environmental disaster, etc., all of which are unfortunate evidence of our lack of love for each other and the world we live in, it is uplifting to see love celebrated in whatever form it comes'*.

**4.10 Vera** makes a second contribution (22 August, 2001) and tries to repair the situation and re/define her position. She suggests that it was to be expected that her viewpoint would raise 'a few hackles' among readers, distancing herself from her own remarks as if she did not own them. She takes up her symbolic grandmother again and tries to establish her point by retreating into a moral argument rather than an attitudinal one: *"Now, granted my grandmother belonged to another century, another era, when traditional Catholics/ Christians would have been totally uncomprehending of anything outside the norm, especially in the context of sexuality. Today she would, I am sure, as I do, 'live and let live' as far as a gay 'relationship' goes, but I doubt if she could understand a gay 'marriage'. The sacrament of matrimony, then and now, is a binding, religious, covenant between a man and a woman, and no amount of understanding or liberal attitudinising can make a same-sex 'marriage' anything more than a travesty"*.

**4.11** In response to Vera's second letter, three further contributors (25 August 2001 and 30 August 2001) challenge Vera's comments about the cultural meaning of matrimony. **Richard** takes up a seemingly contradictory position held by Vera over time: *'The fact is that marriage, in the form of civil union, exists as*

*an alternative, and there is simply no reason for refusing gay couples access to the rights that it entails. All arguments to the contrary inevitably insist on requiring people to follow a moral code to which they do not subscribe. In an earlier letter to this newspaper (23 November 1998), Vera quite rightly called for 'respect for divergent views' - it is a principle which deserves to be universally applied'.*

**4.12** Secondly, **Thomas** (25 August 2001) argues that Vera's view of marriage is partial in the European context, where there is a religious ceremony but it is the civil wedding that legalises a union. He suggests that non-religious civil unions should not conflict with Vera's viewpoint.

**4.13 Hugh** (25 August) wonders if Vera: '*... can rejoice that the happy homosexuals of Moate, Mucklagh, Mullingar, Pollagh, Boher and Banagher [small Irish towns] and all those other charming little midland towns are not cluttering up Roman Catholic churches, desperate to have their unions blessed*'. Using humour, he argues that Vera mistakenly conflates a number of issues together. However, he adds, '*The next time I'm upset by a photo of a 'straight wedding', I may write to The Irish Times. Alternatively, I may have a glass of water and wait for the feeling to pass*'.

**4.14 Vera** writes again (7 September 2001) and seeks to end the discussion:

*'In order to clarify a few points, may I reply to those correspondents who have been exercised by my letter of August 14th? There had been considerable outrage a few days earlier at a poignant photograph you published of a tragic drowning on the west coast. In my original letter, I did not express my own personal feelings at the gay photograph. I simply wondered if it would spark off any outcry among your readers. For myself, I was both amused, bemused and rather saddened by a spectacle of two bald, ageing gays cutting a 'wedding cake' topped by a pair of little male dolls, and I voiced what I know would have been my grandmother's bewildered disbelief at what the world was coming to. And, no, I am not confusing civil and religious marriages. Marriage, whether solemnised in church or registry office, is still a marriage between a man and a woman of whatever faith or none. But it seems to me that gays and lesbians are becoming aggressive in their campaign to make the abnormal normal, by demanding the legal status of marriage, mainly on the premise of property and ownership rights and the bequeathing of same. I would have thought that anyone of sound mind can leave whatever to whomever, without necessarily being in any sort of legal union. What is threatened in all of this is the institution of marriage as we know it, which is under severe attack today from many quarters. In the soap Fair City at the moment, a young woman wants a child without benefit of husband or marriage, but rather the sperm-bank, the implications being that in this respect Ireland is in the Dark Ages. We are not sufficiently enlightened or liberal yet? What message does this give to young people? That the abnormal should be regarded as normal? And does this thinking make for decent living and a healthy society? I must say I am greatly flattered by the correspondent who quoted from a 1998 letter of mine. Does he keep a file of fan offerings? And full marks to the gentleman (August 30th) who consulted the map to find all those midland towns and villages, with their quota of gays, in order to give local colour to his argument! To all my critics who went to the bother of expressing their views, may I say: shall we agree to disagree, and leave it at that?'*

**4.15** Thus there are two stages to the interaction. Vera's initial letter brings replies from Ian, Ken and Mary. Then Vera's second letter (clarification) leads to replies from Richard and Thomas. The trenchant critique of Vera's view leads to her third letter, which seeks to end the discussion.

## Analysis

**5.1** If we look critically at the contributions to this discourse, I suggest that there are two important elements. Firstly, there is the *use of symbols* in the argument to shape and produce the interaction. The symbols that I shall refer to are religiosity, the grandmother and the term 'travesty'. Secondly, we can see that *externalising devices* (Potter, 1996) are important factors in setting up the discursive critique of 'gay weddings' and also in undermining Vera's antigay argument.

### The use of symbols

**6.1** The reference to religious values appears through Vera's invocation of how her grandmother would pray to be spared from the idea of a gay wedding. This reference is veiled because it is made through the medium of Irish language to emphasize her own Irishness and the authenticity of her Catholic standpoint. Vera's allusion to Catholicism is taken to refer to timeless religious values, but which are seen as dated by other respondents. For example, Ian argues that such supposedly Christian views are obstacles "to any progress in understanding commitment between same-sex couples". Likewise, Ken's view is that religious belief systems have to move with the times, while Vera's attitude is interpreted as "sad" because it refuses



to recognise love between partners in a more progressive way. Ken's response is embodied because he uses the letter as a coming out story of his own and we see him stress his own experiential knowledge and agency against Vera's attitudinising because this critique impacts on him personally (Mills, 1940: 905; Giddens, 1991). Mary criticises Vera's lack of tolerance when she mentions how lovely it is to see "love celebrated in whatever form it comes". While Mary's comment may be thought of a 'denial of reality' (Goffman, 1967), and she seems to be 'apolitical', I suggest that this contribution offers what Eliasoph & Lichterman (2003: 743) term the 'default setting', or a position of neutrality to sexual politics. While Mary 'says nothing', there is still a sub-politics of sexuality implicated in her contribution which disputes Vera's view and nonetheless reflects 'cultural work' (Eliasoph, 1997).

**6.2** Religiosity is more explicitly used when Vera (**Vera II**) tries to clarify her views by arguing that while traditional attitudes belong in the past that gay marriage is still a not a valid living arrangement. This lead the two of the final commentators to protest that Vera seems to conflate religious and civil law understandings of marriage. It is at this point that one commentator, Richard, does try to offer Vera a way out of this debate by reminding her how in an earlier letter to the newspaper she called for respect of "divergent views" and he suggests that this is a good policy. In response, Vera writes a final, lengthy justificatory letter, which ends the discussion. Viewing same-sex rights as 'progress' places the debate within wider *discourses of modernization* and the tension between 'natural' heterosexuality and its homosexual Other demonstrates how the debate has ideological underpinnings (Peillon, 1982). Rather than the mistakenly held view that *consensus* is being achieved, we can see that "the mobilisation of a few underlying principles" are critical to the struggle for pre-eminence in "an intellectual and moral framework" (Peillon, 1984: 56) where religion no longer "prevents men from thinking freely" (Durkheim, 2002 [1897]: 342).

**6.3** The next important symbol is that of the Grandmother. This image intrigued me simply because Vera did not use the more common female image of the mother. Vera begins by professing how her (deceased) grandmother would be shocked by the sight of two homosexuals marrying (referring to picture 1). Irish sociologist Tom Inglis (1998a) has highlighted how Irish mothers play important roles in family life as both moral educators and enforcers of discipline. But grandmothers? This sent me exploring literature and I found an interesting contribution by an American ethnographer. Auto/biographically analysing her own relationship with her late grandmother, Carol Rambo (2005: 564) argues that certain aspects of identity are never erased from consciousness, rather there are 'traces' of the past and of experience that infuse the present. My interpretation of Vera's use of the grandmother symbol is that she might have chosen it an image that would be problematic to critique. But rather than the grandmother image being something from the past, we might suggest that a 'trace' is present in this liminal generation in complex, emotional ways. Vera would like her grandmother to clearly stand for normative, universalised, heterosexual and traditional values, whereas the other respondents highlight the temporal aspect of the grandmother being part of another generation and time but loving and benevolent. Here we have a distinction between Weeks's (1995) idea of *myth* and *fiction*: **Vera's** grandmother is a pure, *mythical* figure, whereas **Ken's** grandmother, for example, is imagined as a benevolent, *fictional* figure who would travel to her grandson's gay wedding, were she was still living. More broadly, Ken's grandmother would put the family first and attend a wedding, whereas Vera's imagined grandmother would eschew gay weddings on grounds of prudery. While both grandmothers are imagined, we can see that there is a tension between those (heterosexuals) who have rights of access, control and choice about weddings against those who are seeking intimate citizenship recognition. Much of this clash is played out by appealing to symbols as much as overt personal critique. And with it, we have a tension between prudery and liberalism, between past and present.

**6.4** The third symbol that seems to be important to the interaction is the term 'travesty'. Vera opens the interaction by tentatively wondering if there is anyone else who is offended by this travesty of a wedding. Travesty means an 'incongruous copy' or a 'caricature' or a 'simulacrum' in French (Chadsey et al., 1956). Thus Vera is subtly arguing that gay weddings are not valid living arrangements. While Vera tries to posit this idea, the response by Ken is clear: for him the real travesty is Vera's attitude to gay relationships which seeks actively discriminate against gay men. This leads Vera (in the second letter) to locate 'travesty' in relation to a contravention of the sanctity of heterosexual marriage, which is a retreat into ideology. Her more direct criticism of gay weddings displays her antigay standpoint more explicitly and the ensuing responses tackle the way marriage and religious service are conflated by Vera and voiced as a quite untenable stance.

**6.5** In Vera's final letter (7 September) the idea of 'travesty' disappears from Vera's argument, but she takes a broad swipe at a host of liberal changes in Ireland and suggests that traditional values (at ideology in Peillon's terms) are *under threat* by modern values. Vera seeks to end the discussion having being forced into an explicitly antigay (Smith & Windes, 2000) standpoint by the other correspondents. Reading and re-reading the letters, I wondered if Vera meant to get cornered by her critics, but her views seem to rely on 'fixed' views of the social world rather than seeking to negotiate the meaning of intimacy. Negotiation is important when the law changes. If we take up Durkheim's (2002: 339) comment in his analysis of attitudes

to suicide, we can see a similarity about sexual orientation. In Durkheim's view, when a moral issue (suicide) is no longer proscribed by law and no longer revolts us "we cannot condemn it without condemning ourselves".

## Using externalizing devices

**7.1** This brings me to the other aspect of the exchange, i.e. how the discursive elements of the communication shape the outcome (externalizing devices). Vera begins by describing the gay wedding photo as being 'disturbing, shocking, tasteless, insensitive'. Vera positions her view in subtle ways to be less 'antigay' at the beginning of the interaction by wondering if anyone else agrees with her analysis of what the 'gay wedding' represents. Vera uses externalizing devices (Potter, 1996: 151) which enables her to step away from expressing her own view openly. Does anyone else feel it was a 'travesty', would other people's grandmothers be scandalised, she asks. To agree with Vera, respondents could use a category entitlement device (Potter, 1996: 165), e.g. voicing disapproval through what grandmother might say.

**7.2** Vera suggests the world of her grandmother represents an era where heterosexuality was natural but she inverts myth into fiction when she suggests her Grandmother would disapprove of gay marriage. Other respondents are unconvinced by this assertion whereas it might have been safer for Vera to claim gay marriage was unknown to her grandmother. Initial respondents either focus on their pleasures of looking at the photograph from a neutral setting (Mary), or they tend to critique the grandmother symbol. Ken parodies Vera's Irish comment by turning it into 'Musha live and let live' and suggesting his grandmother would be tolerant, which is a contemporary political claim.

**7.3** Vera then adopts another discursive tack, which Potter (1996: 167-168) terms as a retreat into vagueness, whereby she ends her contribution by asking that everyone 'agree to disagree'. Vera links gay marriage with a whole series of issues, recited almost incoherently, that signal moral decay. It seems that the power of the correspondents, who favour equality, tolerance and fairness, wears away at Vera's use of externalizing devices and renders her presentation of the facts quite meaningless. Through their 'group style' (Eliasoph & Lichterman, 2003), which puts the accent upon tolerance and a pro-gay position, they expose Vera as being antigay, without calling her out over her position overtly. Vera herself becomes more antigay in response to the discussion, and she gets boxed into her final exasperated riposte about social decay.

**7.4** Following Goffman (1977), we might suggest that attempts to deal with messy social situations by securing an essentialist view of sexuality does "not so much allow for the expression of natural differences as for the production of that difference itself" (Goffman, 1977: 324). Her alignment (Goffman, 2004) plays a part in allowing heterosexuality's naturalness to be disrupted. By drawing attention to 'difference' through "allusive phrases" (Goffman, 1983: 18), Vera actually opens up space for sexual stories and a *generative politics* (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997).

**7.5** Overall, moving out of modernity's silence about sexuality in Ireland and finding ways of articulating sexual stories has been a central element of lesbian and gay politics in Ireland (Norris, 1979, 1981; Sweetman, 1981; Rose, 1994; O'Malley, 1996; Dunphy, 1997, Mee & Roynane, 2000). However, it is more recent phenomenon to see that sexual stories are beginning to 'shape a new public language' imbued with power (Plummer, 1995).

**7.6** It is a messy process, but it is an important element of social transformation. Only, a few years on from the German photograph, images of same-sex couples (pictures 2,3, 4 and 5, below) pass without much comment:



**Picture 2.** New identity category: Irish lesbian married women, Marie-Louise Gilligan and Katherine Zappone, pose for the cameras, Dublin before launching their unsuccessful legal challenge to have their Canadian marriage recognised in Ireland (March 2006)



**Picture 3.** A gay couple at their civil partnership in Belfast, December 2005



**Picture 4.** Two lesbians at their civil partnership in Belfast, December 2005



**Picture 5.** Antigay protests in Belfast were met with parody protests by gay rights campaigners who proclaimed that the earth is flat, – another travesty?

### **(And what is it about) the re/emergence of the same-sex couple**

**7.7** What I have suggested so far is that mediatized debates about same-sex marriage serve as a way of breaching Irish prudery about sexuality. In this debate, and others like it, a new sexual story has emerged. Through sexual stories about the gay couple, it has become 'possible to claim rights in ways that could not be done until these stories were invented' (Plummer, 1995: 149-150). Let me clarify this important shift from modernity to late/liquid modernity.

**7.8** In Irish modernity, same-sex couples (even influential men as such as MacLiammoir and Edwards) had to be prudent around disclosure of their sexual orientation. While scholars today (Walshe, 1997) have romanticised their life together, it was only when MacLiammoir died, and there was a public outpouring of grief, that Edwards expressed his gratitude through the Irish Times letters page – which is possibly one of the earliest Irish examples of coming out. In life, however, MacLiammoir did much onstage to publicise the story of Oscar Wilde, and we can see analogies in the lives of both men.

**7.9** There seems to be a couple of stages in the development of the gay couple in the present-day. With the emergence of the Irish gay rights movement, one gay activist, Senator David Norris, refused to shy away from proclaiming his homosexuality in a heteronormative society (Norris, 1979; 1981). His viewpoint

became the genesis of the campaign for gay law reform, and the 'gay man' emerged in the Irish context. Gay men said less in public about relationships, as there seemed to be a felt need to protect other gay men and privacy generally. When I came out in the late 1980's, most activists I met did not discuss what we not term as 'experiments in living' (Giddens, 1991). However, with the increased (albeit uneven) development of a more tolerant society, particularly in the aftermath of decriminalisation (in 1993), we have witnessed the emergence of a debate about the rights of same-sex couples. Thus, the intermittent public debates about same-sex rights serve a consciousness-raising role. However, I also argue that the gender norms of heterosexuality are being tentatively and indirectly problematised through in these debates.

**7.10** Within the fragments of progay stories being told, there is an increasing reliance on human agency and embodied experience (Giddens, 1991). The creativity of agency is used to critique heterosexual norms and traditional social values by turning to the issue of life politics concerns in an increasingly liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000; 2005) as a route out of Catholic social control. For example, in using elements of his own coming out story, Ken highlights how 'individuality is asserted and daily renegotiated in the continuous activity of interaction' (Bauman, 2005: 21) and *stigma* (Goffman, 1963) is less salient in (mediatized) places.

**7.11** Associating stories of coming out in support of 'gay marriage' and wider issue of intimacy leads me to suggest that there is a need to reconfigure 'coming out' from an emancipatory politics to a life politics framework in Ireland. Ken can tell his story about coming out, of course, as he represents a respectable gay man and would-be 'intimate citizen' rather than a sexual deviant or a dodgy queer (Smith, 1994; Weeks, 2004).

**7.12** While the exemplar ends with an appeal to 'agree to disagree', I would argue that the interaction plays a role in helping to create publicly available vocabulary about the same-sex couple's needs (Weeks, 1995; 2004). This debate, and others since, also highlights how privileged a position heterosexuality retains in Irish society. While hegemonic norms "may be fully entrenched nowhere [but]... they can cast some kind of shadow on the encounters encountered everywhere in daily living" (Goffman, 1963: 153) and that is the real challenge for gender politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Update: ... no wedding, not much cake!**

**7.13** As a case in point, Irish sexual culture is an period of sustained liminality, where the certainties of tradition and of Catholic hegemony are losing a grip (Tovey, 2001; Inglis, 2005). Five years on from this gay marriage, it is not clear what same-sex marriage/ partnership rights, if any, will be extended to Irish lesbian and gay couples. Developments have been focused on three inter-related arenas.

## **Mainstream policy and Irish politics**

**8.1** In the period since 2001, several policy documents and reports have made the 'imagined' gay wedding into a more coherent possibility in the public mind (Mills, 1959). There is a clear indication that Civil Unions are favoured rather than gay marriage. Fine Gael, the main opposition party in the Republic of Ireland, has put forward a set of policy proposals for same-sex civil unions (Fine Gael, 2004) as has (belatedly) the Irish Labour Party (Kerr, 2006). Likewise dedicated expert organisations (the Equality Authority, the Irish Council for Civil Liberties and Law Reform Commission) have provided important policy inputs on the issue of gay rights and civil partnerships (ICCL, 2004). As important as these documents are in formulating policy, they seem to be indicative of another dimension of "cultural planning" which is based upon "the rise of the secular professional as the new legislators of morality and meaning" (Tovey, 2001: 79) as ordinary folk are all too rarely consulted and the documents written with the general public in mind. A summary is available from ILGO at their website online at: <<http://www.steff.suite.dk/report.htm#IRELAND>>).

**8.2** The pace of legislative reform is presently in the doldrums ahead of the next Irish general election. When Senator David Norris introduced a brief Civil Partnership Bill (2004) (<<http://www.oireachtas.ie/viewdoc.asp?fn=/documents/bills28/bills/2004/5404/b5404s.pdf>>) into the Irish Senate, it had to be put into abeyance amidst a rancorous debate. The present Fianna Fail/Progressive Democrat coalition government filibustered the issue and argued that yet another policy report around the Constitutional implications was needed, which was widely viewed as a stalling tactic ahead of the next General Election. There seems to be support for Civil Unions but not for same-sex marriage within among mainstream Irish political parties. The Deputy Leader of the Irish Labour Party points to how her party supports civil unions for same-sex couples: *"I do appreciate by the way that there are sections in the gay and lesbian community who may wish to go further than Senator David Norris does in his 2004 Civil Partnership Bill which is presently withdrawn, and would wish for full equivalence, both as regards rights and obligations and as regards terminology, between marriages as presently understood and gay unions. That does not seem to me, however, to be a feasible proposition and it is not one that the Labour Party advocates. We do fully support the civil partnership proposal"* (Mc Manus, 2005). Mc Manus's view is

troubling in that a natural ally of gay law reform appeared to be raising new obstacles, as if to say, thus far and no further. In my own view, the struggle for 'full equality' has only begun.

## **Gay Marriage: The KAL legal challenge**

**9.1** While the attempt to introduce a Civil Union Bill (2004) has been suspended, there was a recent attempt to challenge the Irish State's non-recognition of an overseas same-sex marriage. Two lesbians Katherine Zappone and Ann-Louise Gilligan, who were married in Canada, took a case against the Irish Revenue Commissioners, claiming that their rights as a married couple were infringed because the Irish State did not recognise their marriage (the couple's website and the court judgment is accessible at [www.kalcase.org](http://www.kalcase.org)) The case was dismissed in December 2006 by the Irish High Court, which argued that marriage was "confined to members of the opposite sex... nor was there some changing 'consensus worldwide' in support of same sex marriage" (Carolan, 2006). While the couple plan to appeal to the Supreme Court, it seems unlikely the judgement will be overturned. Although there has been considerable disappointment with this outcome, Irish journalist Nuala O'Faolain grasped the ideological aspect of this (long-shot) legal challenge. Writing in October 2006, she argues, "the decision in this case is not the only important thing about it. The talk that surrounds it matters. Attitude to it matter. It is one of s series of speakings-out which over the last 20 years or so have challenged the silences that held the old Ireland together" (O'Faolain, 2006).

## **Media (again)**

**10.1** Taking up the issue of 'speakings-out' (O'Faolain's, 2006), it is through the Irish media that much work has been done to raise political consciousness about the life politics of same-sex relationships i.e. the dilemmas of same-sex living arrangements, promoting the concept of partnership rights and explaining issues about lesbian and gay parenting through a host of journalistic endeavours within Ireland and globally (Carroll, 2004; O'Doherty, 2001; Scally, 2001; Mundow, 2004; O'Brien, 2004 and Tyrmauer, 2004).

## **Conclusions**

**11.1** After all the heated debate, both in the media and beyond, there is no compulsory requirement for the big wedding, and attendant heterosexualised trappings of marriage, that seemed to so alarm Vera in 2001. However, Ireland is an interesting case as the tensions between the many silences about sexuality and sexual orientation from the past, and whatever possible future directions there may be for Irish intimate life, are only starting to be addressed. We need to recognise that this Irish debate is part of a global phenomenon (the photograph was of German gay men) and we should note how 'cultural actors may not recognize, or want to recognize, the significance of exogenous elements in their cultural repertoire, since it is more reassuring to indigenize that which has been borrowed' (Holton, 2000: 151). The central dilemma for sociology is to explore how a global trend comes to life in a specific context.

**11.2** In this article, I have suggested that erstwhile fragmentary 2001 media debate about 'gay marriage' marked an important historical moment in the politics of gender transformation and the rise of an "intellectual and moral framework within which cultural orientations develop" (Peillon, 1984: 56). The debate which featured here was sparked in reaction to a photographic representation of a wedding ritual, which disrupted the modernist view that a 'ceremony is a declaration against indeterminacy' (Turner (1980: 163). In a subtle way, the assumed naturalness of heterosexual marital conventions has had a rather large post-materialist spanner thrown into the works through the rise of claims for the recognition of same-sex relationship rights.

**11.3** I see the sociology of stories as a core issue in exploring the sociological imagination (Mills, 1959). The sociology of stories offers us '... distinctive advantages because it does not stay at the level of textual analysis: it insists that story production and consumption is an empirical social process involving a stream of joint actions in local contexts themselves bound into wider negotiated social worlds. Texts are connected to lives, actions, contexts and society. It is not a question of 'hyper-realities' and 'simulacra' but of practical activities, daily doings and contested truths" (Plummer, 1995: 24). We are only beginning the task of interrogating late modern uncertainties (Tovey, 2001) as the transformations of masculinities and femininities lead us to problematise heterosexual norms as 'the [only] [ideological] problematic at play' (Hall, 1982: 81).

**11.4** If we take up Foucault's point about power and the legitimization of certain scientific knowledges, we can see that the deeper debate is a discursive one about how "a whole set of knowledges ... have been disqualified as inadequate ... [because they are] beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity...". For Foucault, it is "through the re-appearance of this knowledge, of these local popular knowledges, these disqualified knowledges, that criticism performs its work" (Foucault, 1980: 82). One part of this endeavour is to attend to these small groups, these tiny publics, who perform a role in shaping "a new 'grammar' of everyday life rather than political programmes" (Weeks, 2000: 190). These ideological debates may have

implications for the future transformation of gender and the institution of marriage and turn our attention towards intimacy and intimate citizenship. Perhaps, in due course, we will debate heterosexual marriage and heterosexual civil partnership and why straight people are missing out on what the gays are doing or maybe we will wonder what it was all about - like the Spanish have done (Rovzar, 2007).

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